

# Investigating Learner Perceptions of the KUIS' Self-Access Writing Centre

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# **Investigating Learner Perceptions of the KUIS' Self-Access Writing Centre**

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## **Abstract**

Successful writing conveys a clear message to its intended readers. It also involves the implementation of knowledge, including knowledge of genre, register and language use. In classroom contexts, teachers have the ability to focus students' attention on particular aspects of writing through the materials they employ, the activities they exercise and the feedback they provide. Black and Wiliam's 1998 meta-study of over 250 studies on feedback demonstrated overwhelmingly that feedback promotes learning. When learning moves outside the classroom, learners have greater freedom regarding the tools and focus to consider as they create texts of their own, yet accessing feedback may be less straightforward. The use of writing centres in HE contexts has developed to provide support for academic writing in the UK, where writing is rarely taught as part of the HE courses, yet accessing this resource is strongly correlated with module grades (Yeats et al., 2010). In EFL and EAP contexts writing may be taught as part of a course, and writing support is likely to bring in aspects of language learning. For writers to maintain agency over their written work and in control of their learning, the aspects of their writing they choose to focus on should be respected. This research investigated students' requests and their perceptions of teachers' responses. The results provide an insight into the prominence of certain requests and the students' views regarding the feedback they received.

## **Introduction**

Research on students' written work and teachers' responses to student writing has generally been carried out on student-teacher interactions where the teacher is delivering the course as well as offering feedback on writing. As such, the teacher chooses the focus of the feedback and is likely to be knowledgeable of how this feedback fits in with the progress of

the course and the development of both the writing and the writers. Sadler's (1989) seminal paper identified three factors required for learners to benefit from feedback, which when focused on writing would be that 1) they are aware of what constitutes good writing in the target genre 2) they are aware of their own writing and how this relates to the target genre 3) they know how to proceed to come closer to the target genre. Within this pedagogic construct, Cohen's (1987) research on written feedback based on over 200 college students' perspectives of teachers' written comments concluded that feedback may not have been as effective as teachers would have expected. Subsequent research by others suggests a general agreement that students tended to have positive feelings toward feedback, although confusion with teacher comments sometimes occurred (Arndt, 1993; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995b; Hyland, 1990; Saito, 1994).

Other related research indicates that there are different findings regarding students' preferences in the styles of feedback. Radecki and Swales (1988) found that students want direct correction of all errors while Saito's (1994) findings point towards students' preference for clues as opposed to direct corrections. Moreover, although Saito (*ibid.*) says that students prefer teacher feedback to focus on grammatical errors, Arndt (1993) found that subject students preferred feedback on content to feedback on grammar. The findings into student feedback preferences therefore remain unclear and may be a direct result of contexts and students' previous experience, as has generally been acknowledged.

Feedback at a writing centre will differ somewhat in that the students are likely to be in charge of selecting the type of feedback they request. With face-to-face interaction, there are opportunities for the student to seek clarification should confusion occur. If feedback is not valued, students are unlikely to return to the WC and could undermine the reputation of the WC by dismissing its usefulness amongst peers. Ruegg et al. (unpublished) conducted a case study on a student at Kanda University of International Studies and found that the

student who used the Writing Centre there changed her feedback requests as she moved from one draft to the next. However, LaClare and Franz (2013) found that over 80% of writing centre help was focused on form editing i.e. error correction.

It therefore seems pertinent to investigate the students at KUIS to ascertain their preferences and their perceptions of the feedback they receive. The investigation of students' views of the feedback in the WC could inform how feedback on writing is provided in the rest of the university, particularly for teachers who teach writing as part of their courses and are keen to improve students' learning experience (Hutchings, 2006). The WC goes some way to encouraging students to choose the feedback they would like by asking them to select the focus of the feedback they will receive before the session. This research will consider the extent to which students are satisfied with the feedback, and whether they think their preferences are catered for.

## **Context**

Located in the suburban area of Tokyo, Japan, KUIS is a small private university focusing on foreign language studies and international exchange. KUIS is also known for its effort in promoting learner autonomy and self-access learning, as evidenced by the establishment and popularity of the university's SALC, which provides a variety of one-on-one advisory services conducted in English by the university's English lecturers. These advisory services include the Practice Center (PC), where the students sign up for appointment for one-to-one speaking practice with a teacher, and the Online Writing Center (OWC), where students submit a writing sample via email and are provided with written feedback from the teachers on OWC duty.

When seeking face-to-face individualized instruction and feedback on writing outside of the classroom context, the Writing Centre (WC) in the SALC, is the service available to

the English language learners at KUIS. Staffed by instructors from the university's English Language Institute (ELI), where more than 70 lecturers from English-speaking countries are employed, the WC offers one-to-one 15-minute sessions for students to sign up for throughout the academic year. Students are allowed to make one 15-minute appointment per day via the online sign-up system. The ELI lecturers on WC duty are present for 90 minutes at a time. Throughout the instructional day, there is generally at least one lecturer on duty at the WC to provide students with feedback on writing. In 2014-15, teachers were scheduled for 21 blocks of 90-minute WC duty, allowing up to 126 student visits per week.

Like all other advisory services offered through the SALC, the WC appointments are conducted in English, and the usage of the service is completely voluntary. In order to maximize the instructional effect in the allotted time, students are required to choose a particular area of writing to focus on when signing up for an appointment, and these include spelling and mechanics, grammar, content and structure. In addition, the students are instructed to have specific questions prepared in advance for their appointment, as it aligns with the principles of autonomous learning as well as allowing the WC instructors to provide the most effective and focused feedback in the short amount of time. The instructors are asked not to merely proofread the students' writing, but rather to provide feedback based on learner requests that will enable them to develop as writers.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of students bring their class writing assignments to the WC appointments, asking for specific feedback and advice. The writing assignments can range from emails to a specific audience, instructional or recipe writing, narrative reflection, to research paper and graduation thesis. There are also students who come in with writing projects of their own that are not related to any of the university courses. These projects can include personal statements for study-abroad application and English cover letters for applying for jobs overseas.

The aim of this research is to look closely at the students' attitude and general perception of the service provided through the KUIS Writing Centre, and whether or not they are satisfied with the service. The research also sets out to examine the types of feedback individual learners request at the beginning of the WC session, and how the learners feel about the feedback they receive with a view to answering the following research questions:

- 1) What types of feedback do the students request from the instructors at the Writing Centre?
- 2) Do the students perceive that they received feedback that went beyond their original request?
- 3) How satisfied are the students with the feedback?

### **Methodology**

For data collection, an anonymous online survey was created and consisted of multiple-choice questions and optional comment space for the students to share their additional thoughts on their recent experience using the Writing Centre. The following questions were based on the research questions and delivered via an online survey:

- What type of writing did you bring to the writing centre?
- What did you ask the teacher to check first?
- Apart from asking what you asked the teacher to check, did the teacher check anything else? How did you feel about this extra feedback?
- How did the teacher give you feedback on your writing?
- How helpful were the teachers' comments?

After piloting the initial survey with four WC students and modifying the questions for

clarification, the questionnaire was translated into Japanese, the majority of the students' L1. To ensure that the students understood the questions and were given the freedom to express their opinions fully, the survey was presented as bilingual, and the students were asked to answer the questions in either Japanese or English.

The electronic registration system used for making WC appointments provided each visiting student's university email address as well as the choice of area they wished to receive feedback on. Within 48 hours of every appointment, an email message was sent to the registered email address with details of the research and a link to the online survey. This research took place over the 15-week second semester of the 2014-15 academic year. In order to assure the anonymity of the responses, students were not asked to provide any personal details.

## Results

KUIS has a total student population of about 2,500, and in the fall semester of 2014, the Writing Centre received more than 500 recorded visits by students. This number of visits for half an academic year indicates that the centre is valued by a relatively large number of students. The survey yielded a total of 122 anonymous and voluntary survey responses, a response rate of close to 25%.

To understand the students' expectations of the WC, it is important to consider first what type of writing is brought to the centre. The responses show that the majority of the students used the WC service to receive feedback from instructors on *writing for class* (69.4%), which overlapped somewhat with *presentation script* (9.1%) feedback as presentations could have been for class presentations or presentation competitions. Therefore the notional intention of the WC for supporting learner autonomy appears to hold true as long as it is the students who select to seek this support, students in general visit the service as an out-

of-classroom support that enhances written work for the classroom. It is noteworthy that overseas study was also a relatively common theme with around 20% of responses being connected to feedback for *IELTS writing* (11.8%), and *study abroad application* (8.3%), neither of which was connected to class work at KUIS.

### *Types of feedback requested*

The next survey result of interest is the proportion of feedback that the respondents said they had requested at the beginning of the WC session. The results showed that the majority of the requests were initially for feedback *on grammar* (64%). The second most popular feedback request was *content and structure* (28%), while 13% of the students indicated they asked for feedback on *vocabulary* and 12% of the students said they had requested feedback on *everything* – a choice that was unavailable from the online request form but nevertheless asked for when meeting a WC instructor. This high percentage of requested feedback on grammar mirrors LaClare and Franz's (2013) findings regarding the overwhelming focus on error correction at the writing centre they investigated. It may also reflect a lack of fundamental knowledge about writing or academic writing conventions (Hutchings, 2006) and the belief that all that is required to make their writing better is accuracy, or perhaps that classroom feedback on writing is dominated by error correction. Another interpretation is that this is an area of writing that students believe can realistically be improved in a short amount of time. More research is needed to ascertain the reasons behind this dominant choice at KUIS.



*Perceptions of received feedback*

In spite of these clear requests, a substantial percentage (81.2%) of survey respondents stated that the WC instructors had provided additional feedback beyond their initial request. This offers insights both into where WC instructors have identified improvements that could be made to the texts and how this additional feedback was perceived by the learners. Student responses indicate that where instructor-initiated feedback took place, *vocabulary* was the most significant category at 41%, followed by *spelling* (38%), *grammar* (36%), *content* (30%), *mechanics* (punctuation and use of capital letters) (27%), and *organization and focus* (23%).

With grammar already being the most-requested type of feedback, the high percentage of additional feedback on grammar clearly shows the WC instructors appear to be just as concerned with accuracy as the students. Nevertheless, the additional feedback was generally viewed positively with 86% of the respondents identifying it as *clearly helpful*. This suggests that despite the emphasis on autonomy, students appreciated feedback that was initiated by WC instructors. The optional comments box in the survey collected 19 additional comments, most of which emphasised appreciation for this additional feedback while lamenting the lack of time to explore issues with the writing instructors in depth. The comments also shone a light on the type of feedback that the students found to be useful. The helpfulness of examples and the wish of more time for examples was a common theme throughout the comments.

Table 1 below corresponds to the response choices regarding the manner and method of feedback on student writing as appeared in the survey, and the percentage of respondents who received this feedback.

Table 1.

The teacher told me what was good about my writing.	44.0%
The teacher told me what was bad about my writing.	49.5%
The teacher showed me which parts of my writing I need to fix, but we did not fix them during the reservation.	22.0%
The teacher showed me which parts of my writing I need to fix, and the teacher watched me fix them.	45.0%
The teacher showed me which parts of my writing I need to fix, and fixed them for me.	60.6%

As can be seen by the first two responses, only the minority of students who took part in this survey perceived that they had been informed about the positive and negative aspects of their written work at the WC. In addition, given the lower three categories add up to over 100%, there are clearly overlaps regarding whether the WC instructor or the student is active in the rewriting of the text. With more than one fifth of the respondents indicating that they did not fix the mistakes during the session, and by looking closer to the written responses collected through the optional comments box for this question, there appears to have been a certain amount of time pressure to deal with the texts that were being brought to the WC.

When respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed to four statements based on their overall experience at the WC. These responses were on a 4-point Likert (1932) scale one to four, with *disagree* = 1 and *agree* = four. The results are displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

Statement	Average Rating/4
I understood what was good about my writing.	2.89

Statement	Average Rating/4
I understood what was bad about my writing.	3.61
I understood what to do to make my writing better.	3.45
Overall, I was satisfied with my time at the Writing Centre.	3.67

All four responses clearly show that overall the respondents left the WC with greater understanding of their writing and how to improve it. This connects well to Sadler's (1989) second and third points although it is uncertain from this research whether the students had a clear idea of the target genre they were aiming for. From the WC users' perspective, the feedback was most often focussed on what they needed to attend to, and how to work on these areas. The students do not always receive positive comments about their writing from the instructors. While this fact did not seem to affect the overall satisfaction rate of the Writing Centre experience (3.67 out of 4), from analyzing the optional comments that many students considered positive feedback to be valuable, and many credited it as a contributing factor to the positive experience at the WC.

#### *Satisfaction with feedback*

It was encouraging to learn that the average *overall experience* rating given by the 122 respondents was high at 3.7 out of 4, where 1 = not at all satisfied, 2 = somewhat unsatisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = very satisfied. In other words, 92.5% of the Writing Centre visits were considered a positive experience. Where respondents selected 1 or 2 on this question, the comments left were almost always related to aspects of time - once because the WC instructor was late but more generally the feeling that 15-minute consultations were too short.

In addition, 78% of the respondents indicated that they believed the writing instructor had given additional feedback that went beyond their initial request, and 86% of these respondents considered the instructor-initiated additional feedback to be *clearly useful*. Therefore, in answer to the research question about the level of satisfaction the students have toward the university's WC, students are most often satisfied with the service, and the majority of the users consider the feedback they receive to be useful.

Space was left at the end of the survey for *additional comments*, which was used by 45 respondents. The positive comments further stressed the usefulness of the centre and praised the WC instructors for being helpful. Among the positive comments, the students mostly praised the Writing Centre instructors, and the helpful feedback they received from them. Most comments indicated that students would use the service again. From these comments, a few trends were evident. First, students appreciated when the instructors praised their writing. One comment states, "[The instructor] told me what was good about my writing before telling me what was not good." Another comment, written in Japanese, states, "I'm very happy that [the instructor] praised certain aspects of my writing."

Second, despite the emphasis on learner autonomy, students appreciated it when instructors initiated feedback on the writing beyond the students' initial request. On one comment, the student wrote, "If the teacher don't give the extra feedback, I will not realize that I have so much to grow." One Japanese comment in response to the question about *extra feedback* reads, "I don't want the teachers to just answer my questions. I want them to teach me something they feel is more important," showing that the students value the idea of mentorship, and respect the instructors' perceived expertise. Still another comment says "I was really glad because the teacher understood my opinion and gave me *detail* advice!" (*italics added*) implying that the students wished for more than simple answers, and that the instructor's effort in providing feedback beyond what was asked was valued by the users of

WC.

Third, the students appreciated the attention from the WC instructors, often perceiving this as kindness or friendliness, which was commonly associated with speaking slowly, giving detailed examples, writing comments in the margins, showing interest in the students' lives, and exceeding the 15-minute time limit. In other words, when students felt that the instructors were patient and not pressed for time in providing feedback and examples, they perceived the appointment as "enjoyable" and "helpful".

In addition to the positive comments, a number of negative comments about user experience at the WC were also received. Almost every negative comment was linked to the 15-minute time limit and the lack of flexibility to either extend the appointment or to book another session on the same day. A few comments also suggested that students believe that the time constraint had also negatively affected the quality of the WC instructors' feedback. One Japanese comment at length summarized the sentiment prevalent in these comments:

The time limit is too short. 20 minutes is often needed at the minimum. Also, please change the rule that we can only make one reservation per day. We should be able to make a new reservation after we have finished our first reservation. Despite the fact that there were no other reservations lining up, we were often told, "15 minutes is up. We have to finish." We cannot use the WC effectively this way.

In addition, I wanted to get comments on one paragraph and could only ask to have my grammar checked. There were also weird word choices in the same paragraph, but I had to wait until the next visit to ask a different teacher about it? It makes it difficult to know what exactly is wrong with my writing. I understand that you cannot talk about everything in the short time, but I would like the teachers to

summarize how I can improve the passage and teach it to me in one session.

One other common complaint was the perceived “unwillingness” of certain WC instructors’ to invest time and effort to construct and provide meaningful feedback, as mentioned previously. One comment written in Japanese did not mince words, “I have used the Writing Centre a few times, and know that there are teachers who want to be there, and those who don’t. Sorry to say but only those who want to work at the WC should be there.”

The majority of this type of comment pointed out that certain instructors were unnecessarily strict about the 15-minute time limit, despite the Centre being not busy, showed impatience, and gave minimal feedback without the trouble of providing usage examples or making sure the students had understood the teaching point. It seems that the one-on-one interaction with the WC tutors could vary significantly. One comment says, “There are some good teachers, but there are also not good teachers. I think that is a problem. I remember the name, so I don’t want the teacher to check my writing [again]”.

One commenter used the word “reluctant” to describe an instructor’s perceived attitude when providing feedback, but according to this particular comment, the reluctance was a result of the WC tutor not being well-versed in providing feedback on grammar, the most popular type of feedback requested by the students:

(The experience) largely depends on the teacher if the discussion becomes meaningful or not. Students go to the writing center to learn English but if the teacher is reluctant to discuss the subject, it just becomes waste of time ... native English teachers seem to be not so familiar with English grammar. Some of them say native English teachers don’t know English grammar and they just give up teaching English grammar from the beginning.

It is noteworthy that the word “afraid” was used quite frequently in the extended comments. Some mentioned that they were afraid to use the Writing Centre, but had had a positive experience on their first visit. One Japanese comment stated, “there are people who are afraid to visit the Writing Centre, please make the atmosphere more accessible”. The comment did not specify exactly what had caused the students to be afraid to use the Writing Centre. One comment in English provided a few clues:

actually almost all my friends don't use writing centre because they're afraid of something, so writing centre should advertise this booth by using students who often use here. Also, I've heard some rumours of writing centre in college, and that was a little terrible... (for example, a teacher didn't tell the answer at that time or some teachers were unkind or something like that.) thus, I think there are a few students who use this centre at KUIS. (not many)

The above comment further confirmed that the perceived “kindness” of the WC instructors is an important factor in making the experience positive and optimizing the students’ usage of the Writing Centre.

## **Conclusion**

This research provides valuable insights to the KUIS students’ general attitude, perception and feelings toward the university’s Writing Centre, but there were limitations. For instance, given the anonymity built into the survey, it was not possible to identify whether the 122 survey responses were given by 122 unique individuals. The survey request was sent out after each WC visit, and the same student could have answered the questions several times on their return visits. Similarly, it was difficult to check how many of the 500

visits were by returning students.

One clear finding from the survey results is that from the learners' perspective, most of the feedback requested and provided focused on form. As mentioned in the previous section, the students felt that feedback on grammar was something they could always expect from the Writing Centre. This raises questions around the purpose of the KUIS Writing Centre. Does this establishment wish to be defined as a place that helps students to develop mastery of form? If the answer is yes, how can this be done most effectively in this context? If the answer is no, how can this be changed?

When requesting ideas for improving the Centre, the overwhelming majority of the comments received started with the suggestion of extending the time limit, with most of these comments requesting more flexibility than the current one-fifteen-minute-session-per-day policy. Some students wrote that they felt a minimum of 20 minutes was needed for the WC instructors to fully understand the assignment, read the writing sample, become acquainted with the student's writing style, and to provide feedback that was meaningful and satisfying to the learners. Other comments suggested allowing students to book two consecutive 15-minute sessions at a time, extending the appointment to 30 minutes.

While the responses to the WC were overwhelmingly positive in terms of feedback received and perceptions of clarity regarding how to improve, from the extended written responses that the students provided, we also learned that students' perception of the instructors' attitude was a major factor influencing the overall positive or negative experience of using the Centre. Given the wide range of experiences the respondents had with the different WC instructors, research into WC instructor beliefs, experience and training regarding feedback and WC practice could provide fruitful insights from their perspective. Conducting a similar survey aimed at WC instructors to investigate their beliefs and perceptions of feedback and WC duty would be a logical follow-up to this project.



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